

**CINEMA OF THE BODY:  
THE POLITICS OF PERFORMATIVITY  
IN LARS VON TRIER'S *DOGVILLE*  
AND YORGOS LANTHIMO'S *DOGTOTH***

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Both in Hollywood and European cinema there has been a growing tendency to simplify narrative and characters in favour of a more visual dramaturgy, rather than a text-bound one which focuses on a cause and effect narrative structure. In Hollywood this practice is evidenced in high concept, e.g., *Top Gun* (1986) and blockbuster films, e.g., *Avatar* (2009), and serves strictly commercial purposes. Narrative simplification aims at prioritising style over story, creating moments of visual excess which can be appropriated for marketing and advertising reasons. According to Justin Wyatt high concept films are the product of the synergy of the industry, resulting in objects which appropriate televisual aesthetics, as well as music video tropes. The narrative is superficial and gives way to flashy images which can be reproduced in high tech trailers, TV commercials, music videos and publicity posters.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, the minimisation of text-bound dramaturgy in contemporary European Cinema proposes a more austere type of filmmaking. Certain contemporary European filmmakers, such as Lars von Trier, Béla Tarr, Yorgos Lanthimos and many others show preference for a fragmented narrative structure which reduces the narrative to the bodies of the actors. This aesthetic places emphasis on the performance of the actors as a formal and thematic element, demonstrating a preference for a paratactic style, which does not aim at unifying all

the episodes, but opens the narrative to moments that go beyond dramaturgical consistency.

The differences with the Hollywood paradigm mentioned earlier are more than obvious, since Hollywood high concept films aim at minimising ambiguity; conversely the reduction of the narrative to moments of performative excess, which permeates the works of contemporary European filmmakers, aims at maximising ambiguity and assigning a more productive participation to the audience, a gesture which I understand to be political. I shall return to this argument later in my detailed discussion of *Dogville* (1998) and *Dogtooth* (*Kynodontas*, 2009). Before turning my attention to the specific films, it is important to provide a theoretical framework which can elucidate this performative turn.

Normally, the term performance and performativity describes the passage from text-bound theatre to performance art. However, performativity is a term which has been acknowledged and discussed by film scholars too. In particular, Gilles Deleuze's distinction between "the cinema of action" and "the cinema of the body" has been quite influential in contemporary discussions of film performance. Deleuze discusses the "cinema of the body" as a type of cinema which privileges gestures, postures and attitudes over concrete character and plot development. Deleuze's key contention is that "the cinema of the body" is performative, that is, it cannot be simply understood as the reproduction of a script. Performativity replaces narrative causality.<sup>2</sup>

Within this framework offered by Deleuze, one can define performativity in the cinema as the camera's interaction with the actors' performances in ways that the communication of content is not prioritised. The camera interacts with the performing body in space for reasons that exceed narrative coherence. In many respects, performativity refers to a process in which the act of showing an action is privileged over the action itself, and it is not accidental that Deleuze's definition of

the “cinema of the body” centres on Bertolt Brecht’s concept of *gestus* and the film practice of John Cassavetes. Brecht’s concept of *gestus* refers to a physical acting style which opposes the clichéd dramatic one according to which the actor “becomes” the character he/she embodies. For Brecht, a gestic acting minimises psychological traits and offers a simplification of character through an exposition of attitudes and postures which allow the audience to place emphasis on the social characteristics of the individual instead of the psychological ones. According to Brecht, a gestic acting aims at showing an action, that is quoting it instead of imitating it, with the view to exposing characters as the products of forces and laws that cannot be understood in the phenomenology of human relations.<sup>3</sup> Cassavetes, on the other hand, approaches the filmmaking process not as the narration of a story which strictly adheres to a pre-existing script, but as the exploration of questions, tensions and ideas that emerge throughout the filmmaking process.<sup>4</sup>

Deleuze refers to Brecht and Cassavetes so as to clarify the ways that ‘the cinema of the body’ describes a filmmaking process according to which the mimetic mirroring of identity is replaced by performative moments that fragment the body and destabilise the narrative. It is worthwhile quoting a passage from Deleuze’s argument:

It is Brecht who created the notion of *gest*, making it the essence of theatre, irreducible to the plot or the “subject”: for him, the *gest* should be social, although he recognizes that there are other kinds of *gest*. What we call *gest* in general is the link or knot of attitudes between themselves, their co-ordination with each other, in so far as they do not depend on a previous story, a pre-existing plot or an action-image. On the contrary, the *gest* is the development of attitudes themselves, and, as such, carries out a direct theatricalization of

bodies, often very discreet, because it takes place independently of any role. The greatness of Cassavetes' work is to have undone the story, plot, or action, but also space, in order to get to attitudes as to categories which put time into the body, as well as thought into life. When Cassavetes says that characters must not come from a story or plot, but that the story should be secreted by the characters, he sums up the requirement of the cinema of bodies: the character is reduced to his own bodily attitudes, and what ought to result is the gest, that is, a "spectacle," a theatricalization or dramatization which is valid for all plots. *Faces* is constructed on the attitudes of the bodies presented as faces going as far as the grimace, expressing waiting, fatigue, vertigo and depression.<sup>5</sup>

Deleuze's definition of "the cinema of the body" synopsis an interest in a film language which is not concerned with the mere duplication of a story. It is rather a film practice which is keen on registering performances, unforeseen elements and materials not firmly controlled by the narrative and the director. The effect is that the entire process generates variations from the script that transcend distinctions between filmic and meta-filmic reality, staged and real events. In this context, "the cinema of the body" refers to a self-reflexive filmmaking process which valorizes the process over the finished product. Jonathan Rosenbaum describes it as a "cinema of doubt,"<sup>6</sup> which is more interested in posing questions rather than offering answers. The filmmaker and the performers discover and explore new paths throughout the filmmaking process, while the audience is given time to think and reflect on the portrayed actions instead of passively following the storyline.

**DOGVILLE:****THE POLITICS OF PERFORMATIVITY**

A glaring example of a film which firmly belongs to the category of the “cinema of the body” is Lars von Trier’s *Dogville*. The film’s austere form and its ascetic aesthetics, as well as the references to the theatre practice of Bertolt Brecht give rise to a film style which does away with the tropes of narrative cinema, such as detailed plot, narrative causality and psychological character portrayal. *Dogville* employs a minimalist aesthetic with respect to the set and was shot in a hangar in Trollhättan, a Swedish town. The hangar is used so as to resemble a theatre space where chalk marks are used to define scenography, while the actors act realistically in a set which is far from being realistic.

What needs to be pointed out is that this austere setting combined with the film’s extensive use of voice-over narration, which replaces plot, have their effect on the representation of the individual. Characters are reported by the voice-over making them look like textual constructs. Von Trier does away with psychological portrayal, an effect that is strengthened by the set, whose minimalist scenery gives the spectator the chance to detect the interactions between individuals. Equally important is to emphasise that this is also reinforced by von Trier’s shooting style which allows the actors to work in a more physical way rather than in a dramatic realist one. A cautious analysis of his camera-work since *Breaking the Waves* (1996) can illustrate this point more clearly. The release of that film coincides with von Trier’s preference for a less polished filmmaking style and a less stylised acting which incorporates filmic and extra-filmic responses. The actors were not aware whether they were on frame or not (as Dziga Vertov would say they were shot “unawares”<sup>7</sup>) and this gave them freedom since they did not have to follow a specific plan. This shooting style reassesses the role of the script. The script is the

starting point for the exploration of gestures, attitudes and materials not necessarily scripted.

As such, the camera is not solely busy capturing material, but is also concerned with provoking reactions and gestures, which blur the boundaries between the diegetic and the extra-diegetic identity of the actors. This acting style produces an effect of interruption and not a seamless reproduction of unified characterization. Von Trier offers the actors the possibility to produce more than what lies in the script, something which is very much related to a whole shift from acting to performance. In an interview he gave me, I asked von Trier whether this *modus operandi* is deliberately interested in making the actors act out of character. Von Trier responded:

I am very interested in this. I am interested in capturing the actors when they are in and out of character. The borderline between the private individual and the character is very intriguing. Especially, when it overlaps and you cannot tell whether a reaction can be attributed to the actor or the character. That is where I try to go very often.<sup>8</sup>

The camera becomes performative and adds a sense of mobility that is not concerned solely with the simulation of actions; it is rather interested in provoking responses, attitudes and gestures that function as a meta-critique of the portrayed actions. This is a practice that can be identified in the films of Cassavetes — Deleuze's major example of a director whose films belong to the category of "the cinema of the body."<sup>9</sup>

The aforementioned comments on a film practice which aims at provoking reactions rather than simply capturing narrative material are crucial to our understanding of von Trier's use of the camera as a performative tool that

foregrounds the performance of the actors and highlights the process of creating a character by provoking uncomfortable feelings to the actor while she/he is in the process of impersonating a character. This clarification provides the impetus to reveal *Dogville's* politics of performativity and comprehend the film's focus on gestural and performative contradictions. I do not want to get bogged down into issues of content, but let me briefly summarise the film's story. *Dogville* tells the story of Grace (Nicole Kidman) a young fugitive who finds refuge in a small town in the Rocky Mountains. When Tom (Paul Bettany), a young self-appointed intellectual, meets Grace chased by a bunch of gangsters, he protects her and decides to accommodate her in Dogville. To do so, however, he has to gain permission from the people. Grace will be their chance to prove that they are committed to community values. The people accommodate her and Grace for her part, and at Tom's suggestion, volunteers to help the citizens of Dogville with any errands that need to be done. Initially, nobody accepts her services, but eventually people consent to let her do things "that they do not really need," but can make their lives better.

The people decide that Grace is entitled to stay, but when they realise that there is a large amount of money offered to anyone knowing of her whereabouts, they start abusing her in various ways. Grace is coerced to work longer hours, to accept a pay cut and she eventually becomes the victim of sexual assault on the part of the male population. In the last chapter, the citizens of Dogville decide to deliver her back to the gangsters. The "big man" (James Caan) turns out to be her father and after a brief conversation between them, we learn that the two of them had disagreed about his brutal methods. The reason that Grace left him was because of her willingness to prove that human beings are essentially 'good'. Now that her experiment has failed her father offers her the possibility of sharing his power with

her. Initially, Grace hesitates but eventually she accepts his offer and orders the gangsters to burn the town and execute its citizens.

The film has provoked various critical readings, but there have not been any discussions concerning the ways that the minimalist setting and von Trier's shooting style thematise the very theme of performativity, making the audience rethink any essentialist preconceptions of identity. I have chosen to discuss two scenes from the film which may clarify this. In the first one, which takes place in chapter eight, Grace publicly discloses the abuses she has suffered from the citizens of Dogville. Humiliated by her speech, Dogville's residents ask Tom to side either with them or with Grace. Frustrated by their response, Tom returns to Grace's house. Initially, we get to see both characters lying in bed assuming that they share an affectionate moment. When Tom explains to Grace that he has been asked to choose between her and Dogville, the camera alternates between the left and the right angle of the frame. This alternation is followed by Tom's radical change of *Haltung* (the German word for attitude and posture that Brecht employs repeatedly to show how the body's postures respond to social stimuli). Tom's soothed *Haltung* is replaced by a posture of aggression and he starts making sexual advances towards Grace. He imposes himself aggressively on top of Grace and the camera zooms out to capture the material via a high-angle shot. The camera shows the characters from a great distance and eventually zooms in bit by bit. This antithesis between distance and proximity highlights Tom's exaggerated *Haltung* and divides the character with the purpose of externalising his actions and revealing their social significance.

Tom's change of *Haltung* cannot be understood in terms of psychology. The scene produces a corporeal energy that can be observed in the character's postural behaviour and in the sudden camera movement that decreases the magnification of the image and then zooms in so as to adopt an analytical stance towards the material. Here, von Trier's representation of the body follows the Brechtian practice,



according to which the body's *Haltung* and *gestus* can reveal a set of "interpersonal" and social relations that help the audience identify the social laws motivating an individual's actions. The social law that regulates Tom's relation to Grace's body is the law of exchange-value. Tom implies that by rejecting everyone else, he acquires the right to enjoy her body. He is siding with Grace hence his attempted rape becomes a reward for his loyalty to her. However, at the level of actions, he is siding with the community by oppressing Grace, and his attempt to force himself on her ratifies this. The contrast between image and communicated speech puts this forward very strongly. Tom defends his lust for Grace, arguing that it is the ideals they share that made him choose her, whereas he is portrayed as unable to suppress his carnal passion.

In effect, a natural instinct, namely sexual desire is estranged, and calls attention to the connection between sexuality and power. Von Trier does not treat sexuality as natural, but as part of a relationship founded upon exchange value, which is heightened by Tom's use of language that alludes to an economic terminology.<sup>10</sup> It is this performative contradiction that is stressed by the camera, which shows an action and simultaneously analyses it so as to question it. This particular scene showcases how the camera's interaction with the body of the actor de-individuates an action and embeds it in a social context. At this point, the performative contradiction, or the false relationship between the character's pronouncements and his social practice is rendered visible by von Trier. Tom, the embodiment of a liberal attitude of 'openness and acceptance' adheres to Dogville's mental outlook and proceeds to impose his sexual desires on Grace following the capitalist law of making profit through exchangeability that he introduced to the town. When Grace refutes his sexual advances, Tom aligns himself plainly with Dogville and decides to deliver her to the gangsters so as to benefit from the financial reward. This performative change offers an implacable autopsy of the

“financialization of social relationships.” Of particular note is that this point is communicated mainly by means of a physical acting which highlights the contradictions between the character’s somatic attitudes and his pronouncements. The camera makes conspicuous the character’s body so as to “disembody” him and to prevent a direct equation between an action and the individual. It is rather the social gesture that is emphasised with the intention of revealing the link between the individual and the social laws that generate certain responses and actions. Throughout the film the social law that reveals the individual as alterable is the establishment of a capitalist ethic of making profit through exchangeability, which is introduced to the town by the time Grace and Dogville enter into a “reciprocal exchange.” In stressing the fact that the characters become more violent after being conditioned to the capitalist ethic of exchange value, von Trier shows the individual as the product of conflicting social forces and not as self-determined.

The view of the individual as performative is also evidenced by Grace’s portrayal and her shift from a person acting ‘good-heartedly’ to a mass-murderer. Grace as a character stresses the tension that arises when one is dedicated to enforcing values upon people not prepared to accept them. Apparently, the film’s critical reception has not really identified this idea, something that led von Trier to elaborate on it with more clarity in *Manderlay*,<sup>11</sup> which is the second part of a (still incomplete) trilogy titled “USA: Land of Opportunities” and shares thematic and formal similarities with *Dogville*. Taking up the story of Grace and her father after the end of *Dogville*, *Manderlay* is set in the early 1930s in a plantation in Alabama, within which slavery has not been abolished. Grace is shocked to hear this and insists on staying in the estate to ensure the slaves’ transition to freedom. She naively believes that the empowerment of the former slaves will end their oppression, whereas the members of the community use their democratic rights to their own advantage and eventually lead it to self-destruction. Commenting on

Grace's behaviour in *Manderlay*, von Trier stated something that applies to her attitude in *Dogville* too. As he says: "The idea of spreading your values to other places is that's what in the past used to be called a mission and is problematic."<sup>12</sup>

This standpoint is clearly articulated by *Dogville's* ending in which Grace decides that the "world would be a better place without Dogville." In the midst of a lengthy camera movement, the lighting changes and we get to see a high-angle shot of Dogville. The camera slowly zooms in and in a choreographic movement pans from right to left to capture the people of Dogville in a state of bewilderment. This movement intensifies the antithesis between the camera's mobility and the static position of the actors. The following frame shows Grace, who performs a circular movement that heightens stylisation. The tableau here focuses on the characters' change of *Haltungen*, and the uninterrupted camera movement generates contradictory processes that question any essentialist notions of identity and the moralist viewpoints advocated by the main character. When Grace comes to her final conclusion, she walks backwards in a steady and stylised movement which becomes rhetorical and prognosticates the forthcoming catastrophe. Grace's stylised movement towards her father's car becomes a gestural exposition of an attitude and a rhetorical statement that uncovers the thin boundaries between moralist reformism and violence. This rhetorical statement is intensified by the ironic voice-over which asserts that it was one's duty to reinstate order "for the sake of humanity and for the sake of other towns." What confounds matters more is that Grace legitimises violence using her standardised moralist rhetoric. The sound and image counterpoint de-individuates Grace and places emphasis on the performative contradiction of effacing a whole town "for the sake of humanity."

Action, images and the recited text are in conflict and the effect is that Grace's identity is deprived of any notion of interiority or psychological motivation. Her identity is performative and here my understanding of the term is informed by

Judith Butler's discussion of a performative act as an act that is simultaneously "dramatic" and "non-referential."<sup>13</sup> A performative act is "non-referential" because it does not describe an act deriving from an inner essence or a fixed identity. By contrast, identity emerges out of the performing of specific acts and thus it is performative, that is, subject to transformation. Butler appeals to the concept of performativity to discuss gender construction as a process that reproduces cultural stereotypes regarding gender identity. From this perspective, Butler concludes that gender identity is performative and as she says, "it is real only to the extent that it is performed."<sup>14</sup> For Butler, the revelation of the process of performativity is of political importance, because it may give one access to the very falsity of "identity normalization" and uncover processes of social construction that are not visible. Butler's view of identity as performative exposes the connection between identity and society, because a performative action follows certain social rules which negate the bourgeois understanding of the individual as static and self-determined.

Butler's analysis sets up the terms that help us understand the ways that von Trier's camera interacts with the restricted space and the actors' bodies so as to uncover them as performative constructions. The film's deconstruction of the characters' identities by means of performativity shows individuals as the outcome of conflicting forces and interests. *Dogville's* experimental form, which reduces the narrative to the bodies of the actors and does away with settings, aspires to debunk the capitalist understanding of the individual as self-determined, and to unveil the characters' dependence on broader social structures. Consequently, their changeability cannot be reduced to a change in moral attitudes. Concomitantly, von Trier's analytical observation of the characters' *Haltungen* concentrates on the primacy of social and political relationships motivating their actions and questions their moralist rhetoric implying that the moralist amelioration of the system is a simulacrum given that ethics cannot be separated from politics.

**DOGTTOOTH:****PERFORMATIVITY AS EXPERIMENTATION**

In the previous section, I discussed the ways von Trier's reduction of the narrative to the bodies of the actors brings to the fore contradictions which defy the view of the individual as unified. In Yorgos Lanthimos' film *Dogtooth*, the director follows a similar practice and shifts the interest from dramatic action to performative happenings. The actors' bodies are not simply the carriers of dramatic *agon*, but the medium through which the filmmaker captivates the most ordinary aspects of human behaviour, so as to dissect them and analyse them.

*Dogtooth* tells the story of a family living in the outskirts of an unspecified town somewhere in Greece. All the characters in the story are nameless and the family consists of the father (Christos Stergioglou), the mother (Michele Valley), the older daughter (Aggeliki Papoulia), the younger daughter (Mary Tsoni,) and a son (Christos Passalis). The kids have not been outside the house's tall fence since they were born and their education is the outcome of a "home-schooling," without any influence from the world outside the house. The father keeps on warning them of the dangerous world beyond the limits of their villa and has taught them that they can only leave their house securely once their dogtooth falls. The situation is perplexed by the fact that the language system that the kids have inherited from their parents is illogical and has no representational attributes. It is a rather invented vocabulary which attributes different meanings to common everyday words. For instance, the youngsters are told that zombies are "yellow flowers," "the sea is a sofa" and keyboard is the definition for female genitalia. Christina (Anna Chalaintzidou), a security guard working in the father's factory, is the only person from the outside world who enters the house, in order to fulfil the son's sexual

desires. Her presence in the house will eventually provoke a series of events that will challenge the family's serenity.

Tired of offering her sexual services without having an orgasm, Christina offers the older daughter a headband, asking for oral sex in return. The latter's eventual discovery of sexual pleasure provokes curiosity for the world outside her house. Initially, she practices the same "game" with her sister and offers her a headband in exchange for oral sex. However, the lexical and hermeneutic boundaries offered by her family cannot satisfy her anymore and she decides to break her right dogtooth so as to explore the world outside her familiar environment.

The film's critical reception so far has focused on issues of content rather than form. Many critics have referenced the Fritzl child imprisonment case in Austria, which was discovered in 2008.<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that the content has captured the public's and the critics' attention, I suggest that it is through a study in form that we can comprehend its political complexity.

Lanthimos' work is heavily influenced by von Trier's post-Dogme 95 cinematic practice, which I described earlier, and in particular by his preference for a minimalist aesthetic, which manipulates the actors' performances, with the view to exploring things instead of communicating unambiguous dramaturgical assertions. When viewing *Dogtooth*, one is faced with a series of problems that derive from the fact that the film does not create a coherent fictive cosmos produced by means of mimetic reproduction of a script. Without being an anti-representational avant-garde film, *Dogtooth* has a very loose and open-ended dramaturgy. The film starts showing us two sisters listening to a tape recorder and learning some new words by rote. Among the paradoxes of the language system that they inherit from their parents is the explanation that motorway stands for a strong wind and that road trip is a highly durable material used for the manufacturing of floors. The initial

audience response is that of bewilderment and even laughter given that the language spoken by the characters is not necessarily representational.

The film's blockage of linguistic communication affects its narrative to the extent that the final cut looks like a collection of happenings, which relinquish the idea of a discernible beginning, middle and end. Furthermore, there are times that the camera treats the characters as props for the *mise-en-scène*. A prominent example of this is the first sexual encounter between the son and Christina. Initially, the camera focuses on the lower parts of the characters' bodies without showing their faces. The characters start undressing in an emotionless way as if performing a task. The camera remains immobile and the sole movement in the frame derives from the actors' gestures in the diegetic space. When both characters lie in bed, Christina starts exciting the son's genitals in a mechanical way. Both characters' gestures are stylised and do not intend to reflect clear-cut feelings and attitudes. As such, the gestures are not mimetic and strip performances from emotional and rhetorical unity. From this perspective, the characters' postures and their bodily attitudes are not reproductive but explorative. Representational stability is downplayed in favour of a process that experiments with the characters' gestures and postural attitudes, so as to produce shock and disorientation in the viewer.

In the first section of this article, I discussed Brecht's concept of *gestus* and the way Deleuze analysed it so as to propose a cinema of 'attitudes and postures'. For Brecht, *gestus* was an efficient way of presenting the body, not as the reflection of a predetermined content, but as the locus of dialectical explication. Meg Mumford defines *gestus* as "socially encoded expression"<sup>16</sup> which indicates that the body is in a constant dialogue with the social environment. Thus, a character is not an individual with fixed and unchanged characteristics, but is always defined by the social context in which he/she is embedded. This short return to Brecht's theory and practice can help the reader perceive the ways Lanthimos builds upon Brecht's

predilection for a physical acting, without sharing the former's social certainties. Here it is crucial to note that Brecht's aspiration to make the familiar strange strived to help the audience achieve *Aufhebung* (dialectical enlightenment). The term *Aufhebung* refers to Brecht's willingness to distance the audience so as to unveil cognitive revelation, and truth which are predicated upon the Orthodox Marxist interpretative system. Brecht's denaturalisation of the material by means of *gestus* aimed at challenging the audience's understanding of reality so as to reveal, as David Barnett explains, that social reality is not static, but is shaped by the laws of historical materialism.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Barnett explains that post-Brechtian performance practice retains Brecht's emphasis on a denaturalised performing style, but does not share his epistemological certainties, and thus the body is not simply reduced to a producer of concrete social gestures as it is the case in orthodox Brechtian practice.<sup>18</sup> Instead, the body becomes a provocateur of gestures that connect it with the social reality, but the reference points to decode the material on stage are no longer given.

Lanthimos, a film director with a performance art background treats the body as a potentiality in a way that the very act of performing is thematised. In a master-class he gave in Sweden Lanthimos explained that he started his career by filming theatre and dance performances. As he says:

I guess that helped me understanding (sic) the physicality of things much more. It is something I like very much. That's why I mostly work that way with the actors — more physically instead of intellectually or theoretically [...] We just do things physically. I challenge them to go to rehearsals and try this or that without explaining why.<sup>19</sup>



This physical way of working has its effect on *Dogtooth* which is like an assemblage of various happenings loosely connected with each other, in which the isolated teenagers perform various tasks, quote words that have no meaning per se, only to end up learning that the boundaries between performing an identity and being somebody are quite hazy. The film's locus dramaticus becomes a meta-performative space, in which the actors do not dramatise situations, but perform activities, which undermine identity and reveal it as a mere act. The kids are shown performing various exercises, and games that are part of their home schooling, but it is by means of these games and their quotability that they get acquainted with their sexual and violent side, which has been suppressed by their family.

A closer look at another scene may clarify things further. During a conversation between the two sisters one of them complains that she feels unwell. The younger one volunteers to examine her and while offering her medical advice (that she has obviously quoted from an unidentified source), the camera focuses on the lower part of the characters' bodies. The camera's disinterest in the characters' conversation is made conspicuous by the fact that once again we are denied access to their faces. Accordingly, the separation between voice and body is heightened and the produced frame fluctuates between being part of a narrative structure and part of a performative instance that disorganises the narrative.

The latter function of the scene draws attention to the body as an ontogenetic force and not as a vehicle that solely serves narrative requirements. The result is a physical rather than a text-based dramaturgy, which focuses on the possibilities stemming from the actors' unaffectionate performances. To paraphrase Kristin Thompson, the film generates a performative excess which aims at questioning the dominant frame of representation. Thompson employs the term narrative excess to point to the use of dramaturgical tropes which are not necessarily used to communicate story-telling material. As she explains, identifying moments of excess

in a film can open up the audience's attention to the politics of form, and the ways a film negates the dominant frame of representation. As she says:

An awareness of excess may help change the status of narrative in general for the viewer. One of the great limitations for the viewer in our culture has been the attitude that film equals narrative, and that entertainment consists wholly of an 'escapism' inherent in the plot. Such a belief limits the spectator's participation to understanding only the chain of cause and effect. The fact that we call this understanding the ability to follow the narrative is not accidental. The viewer goes along a preordained path, trying to come to the "correct" conclusions; skilful viewing may consist of being able to anticipate plot events before they occur (as with detective story, which becomes a game in guessing the identity of the criminal before the final revelation). This total absorption in narrative has some unpleasant consequences for the act of viewing.<sup>20</sup>

For Thompson, moments of excess in a film aim at disorganising the cause and effect narrative and introducing gaps in the story-telling process. These gaps reject traditional plot, character and setting; they refuse to reduce the film narrative to interpersonal interaction in dialogue and to a causal articulation of the chain of events. Whereas Thompson's understanding of excess refers mainly to a visual excess, which has been co-opted even by the Hollywood industry, Lanthimos' film engages in a dialogue with performance art so as to communicate a performative excess. The actors' performances combined with the structuring of the story as a connection of happenings loosely connected with each other simplify the fabula and place attention on the very performative process. Lanthimos' employment of performativity instead of concrete dramatic tropes aspires to reveal the tension

between language, the body and the speaking subject, so as to render the act of interpretation problematic.

Scholarship has acknowledged the ways that performative excess can disturb narrative coherency by joining together 'real' and representational images. The view of performance as "negativity,"<sup>21</sup> that is, as a means of resisting the dominant strategies of visual representation has been proposed by performance and film commentators. Among them Peggy Phelan and Elena del Rio suggest that performance art strategies become the means of resisting the reproduction of ideological certainties. They achieve this by placing emphasis on the very performativity of the communicated material and on moments of non-performing and acting.<sup>22</sup> In other words, performance and performativity are, as Britta Timm Knudsen says, bound up with a 'constructivist/productive world view' and not a reproductive one.<sup>23</sup> Then again, while the aforementioned theorists mention performance in relation to acting, it is noteworthy that performative excess can also derive from the performative use of the camera, as I mentioned earlier in my discussion of *Dogville*; this practice is something that we can identify in *Dogtooth* too.

My description of the aforementioned scenes clarifies that Lanthimos' camera is not concerned with presenting the body as a neutral reproducer of dialogue and actions. The body is seen as a potentiality, something which is directly related to a preference for thematising the very act of performing. Lanthimos employs these series of performative tricks, and his characters are continuously in search of a script in the diegetic and in the meta-level too. In his previous film, *Kinetta* (2005), he followed the same *modus operandi* and presented an austere story, in which a policeman in a Greek resort town enlists a cameraman and a hotel maid to help him resolve some crimes by means of performative re-enactments. The film's employment of long-take cinematography and slow camera movements fits exceptionally well with the actors' slow-motion re-enactment of the crimes. In the

end, the director deprives the audience of a narrative resolution of the crimes; through these performative re-enactments, the audience becomes aware of the micropolitics of everyday life in this rural part of Greece. On this basis, performance operates as a means of social discovery and Lanthimos puts forward the conjecture that an isolated incident that involves “victims and perpetrators” cannot be perceived outside a broader social context.

Similarly in *Dogtooth*, Lanthimos’ emphasis on the body — reinforced by the blockage of linguistic communication — draws the audience’s attention to the fact that what passes as “real” cannot be understood outside socially constructed representational systems. Like Brecht, the director suggests that individuals are not one-dimensional/unchanged and different social circumstances and representational systems can produce different social beings. Lanthimos’ minimisation of dramaturgy is still committed to the Brechtian employment of performance as a means of exploration rather than reproduction, but his *modus operandi* avoids the simplification of the Orthodox Brechtian practice.

## CONCLUSION:

### THE POLITICS OF PERFORMATIVITY

The examples of the films I discussed indicate that both Trier and Lanthimos engage with modernist experiments of the past, as well as with a realist film style, which builds upon the long-take documentation of the actors’ performances, inviting the actors to develop themes during the filmmaking process. Here realism does not refer to dramatic realism, that is, the causal linkage of a sequence of events, which consist of a series of coherent psychological motivations. By contrast, Trier’s and Lanthimos’ realism is more in line with a filmmaking practice which clings into

indexicality in order to incorporate the performative contingent. The films' penchant for austerity and their focus on performativity aims at destabilising the narrative, so as to refuse to offer the audience material for consumption. Evidently, both filmmakers reference modernist experiments of the past (Trier includes obvious references to Brecht's epic theatre, while Lanthimos' intentional abuse of the language system and his employment of the performers' body as a means of discovering social gestures has evident references to Brecht, as well as to 1960s Happenings).

Both filmmakers combine references to modernism with a realist use of the camera — in the Bazinian sense which refers to an aesthetics of reality that undermines the role of the script in favour of the presentation of fragments which have a material connection with their referent.<sup>24</sup> Despite the fact that Bazin's writings on realism were considered reactionary by the 1970s film theory, it is important to understand that contemporary geopolitical changes, neo-liberalism's apotheosis of mobility and the predominance of the media have changed the dominant understanding of realism. It is not accidental that present-day film students find more "realistic" narratives that might have nothing to do with the everyday material reality (such as blockbusters), rather than films which manipulate realistic conventions (e.g., long-takes and continuity editing). In this context, von Trier's and Lanthimos' performative realism can be seen as a gesture of negativity; they intend to minimise dramaturgy so as to discover — to paraphrase Giorgio Agamben — the social gestures<sup>25</sup> and the micropolitics of everyday life that have been smoothed by contemporary cinema's employment of technology as a reproductive tool. Consequently, the idea of the filmability of the performative contingent goes against structure, meaning and rationalisation — the stock in trade of capitalist mass culture. To understand this performative realism as a gesture of negativity, we need to turn our attention to the Hollywood paradigm.

There has been an ongoing discussion among film studies scholars which centres on the ways Hollywood has de-radicalised certain formal experiments initially introduced by filmmakers who worked on the margins of the industry. Thus, in recent years we witness the fact that Hollywood has reappropriated radical formal experiments, not to open up human perception and thought to new roads of discovery, but to reproduce a set of relationships as natural, as well as to celebrate the expansion of the industry. Thomas Elsaesser's discussion of *Avatar* is very much a good starting point to see how Hollywood engages with modernist experiments such as self-reflexivity, not to liberate the audience from the confines of conservatism, but to reproduce the very ideas of consumerism and to promote marketability. As he says:

As far as Hollywood is concerned, it wants audiences to interact with images, while Hollywood itself acts with the images. Which is to say, for the industry that makes them, images are instructions for actions — they trigger further moves, purchases and events — rather than pictures to contemplate or immerse yourself in, however much “immersion” might be the stated objective. In this respect, *Avatar* the film functions itself as an “avatar” in the larger system, of which it is the most successful representative. Hence my argument that when Hollywood films allegorize their own conditions of possibility, which are by necessity contradictory, they perform cognitive switches or enact a reversibility of roles: a master–slave relationship that never stabilizes itself.<sup>26</sup>

Elsaesser's comments provide the methodological framework to understand something that has been also pointed out by scholars in American cinema, that is, Hollywood's absorption of modernist and art cinema experiments aims exactly at a

new way of commodification, which strives to serve the needs of diverse audiences.<sup>27</sup> Geoff King, for instance, mentions how Hollywood blockbusters have manipulated Sergei Eisenstein's concept of dialectical montage, not to make the audience conscious of the contradictions of capitalism, but to increase the pleasures of narrative consumption. Hollywood valorises spectacle and special effects instead of narrative, so as to minimise the complexity of the stories it tells. Moments of incoherence, as King rightly observes, are not signs of complexity but they have to be seen as "a symptom of offering something to everyone."<sup>28</sup>

Minor European cinemas can resist Hollywood's ability to assimilate even the most radical experimental forms, by focusing on the roots of European art cinema and its preference for a filmmaking style which holds onto indexicality as a means of registering contingency and the plurality of the real. My understanding of the term Minor cinema derives from Deleuze's discussion of minor literature, as a form of literature which intends to subvert a dominant culture from within.<sup>29</sup> As the examples of contemporary filmmakers, like Lars von Trier, Béla Tarr, Yorgos Lanthimos, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Costas Zapas and Benedek Fliegauf, indicate, Minor cinemas benefit from returning to a performative cinematic austerity, which manipulates film performance as a means of resisting ideological and market-driven narrative certainties and clichés. Apart from the two objects I have used as case studies, contemporary films like *The Turin Horse* (*A torinói ló*, 2011), *Dealer* (2004) and *Minor Freedoms* (*Mikres eleftheries*, 2008) employ a performative corporeal realism that focuses on the productive aspects of representation, rather than the reproductive ones, so as to show the real as contingent and changeable. This type of performative realism references the modernist experiments of the past to construct an anti-commodity aesthetic, which resists reproduction and asks the audience to rethink the staginess and the in-authenticity of everyday forms of human interaction. I suspect that there is some very interesting research that needs to be

done on the interrelationship between the current economic crisis and the emergence of films, which belong to the category of “the cinema of the body,” in countries like Greece, Hungary and Romania.

## NOTES

1. See Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 18.
2. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlison and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 191-92.
3. See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York and London: Methuen, 1964), 57.
4. See George Kouvaros, *Where Does It Happen?: John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
5. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 191-92.
6. Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movies as Politics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 53.
7. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 1984), 71.
8. Interview with Lars von Trier, personal communication, 12 Nov. 2010.
9. See also Kouvaros, *Where Does It Happen?*, 134.
10. Robert Sinnerbrink also discusses the idea of exchange in the film, but while I see the act of exchange as a social law that motivates the characters' physical actions, Sinnerbrink discusses it in different terms, that is, as the 'libidinal economy of desire' that infiltrates the system. See Sinnerbrink, "Grace and Violence: Questioning Politics and Desire in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*," in *SCAN / Journal of Media Arts Culture* 4:2 (2007), [http://www.scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal\\_id=94](http://www.scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=94).
11. See Katja Nicodemus, "I am an American Woman," in *Signandsight.com*, <http://www.signandsight.com/features/465.html>.
12. Von Trier qtd. in Carsten Bramsen, *The Road to Manderlay* (2005), in *Manderlay* DVD extras.
13. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Construction: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Auslander (London: Routledge, 2003), 106.
14. Ibid.
15. See Peter Bradshaw, "Dogtooth," *Guardian*, 22 Apr. 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/apr/22/dogtooth-review>. See also Philip French, "Dogtooth," *Observer*, 25 Apr. 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/apr/25/dogtooth-film-review>.
16. Meg Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 53.
17. See David Barnett, "Toward a Definition of Post-Brechtian Performance: The Example of *In the Jungle of the Cities* at the Berliner Ensemble 1971," in *Modern Drama* 54:3 (2011): 340.
18. Ibid., 337.
19. Yorgos Lanthimos, GIFF master class, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=tLCgibK8jI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=tLCgibK8jI).
20. Kristin Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 140.
21. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 165.
22. See *ibid.*, 165. See also Elena Del Rio, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 17.
23. Brita Trimm Knudsen, "It's Live: Performativity and Role Playing," in *Performative Realism*, ed. Rune Gade and Anne Jerslev (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005), 270.
24. See André Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism," in *What is Cinema?*, vol. II, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 21.
25. I am paraphrasing Giorgio Agamben's argument that "[i]n the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures seeks to reappropriate what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss." Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1978), 137.



26. Thomas Elsaesser, "James Cameron's *Avatar*: Access for All," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 9:3 (2011): 261.
27. Warren Buckland and Thomas Elsaesser, *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 78.
28. Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 105.
29. See Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 19.